

Market Opportunities and Challenges for Organic Products in Karnali Province, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the perspectives and experiences regarding market opportunities and challenges of organic products in Karnali Province, Nepal. By conducting in-depth interviews with 30 participants, including farmers, entrepreneurs, and experts in the organic sector, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the organic market dynamics in this region. The findings reveal significant market opportunities driven by growing local and international demand for organic products, increased health consciousness, and environmental awareness. Integrated agro-tourism, government and NGO support, export potential, and local community empowerment further enhance the market prospects. However, several challenges impede the growth of the organic sector in Karnali Province, Nepal. These include limited infrastructure difficulties in obtaining organic certification, restricted market access, intense competition from conventional products, and a need for more technical skills and knowledge among farmers. Additionally, local consumer awareness and perception of organic products need improvement to sustain market demand. The study underscores the need for collaborative efforts from public and private stakeholders to invest in infrastructure, provide technical training, streamline certification processes, and enhance market access. Addressing these challenges can help maximize the potential of organic farming in Karnali Province, promoting sustainable economic growth, environmental conservation, and improved livelihoods for local communities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In marketing, several innovations have increased the global demand for organic products over the last ten years. The first is the increased understanding of how nutrition and health are related. The second reason is the recent spate of widely reported food incidents, which significantly raised consumer knowledge and interest in food safety. Perceived environmental benefits are another compelling argument in favor of organic foods. Lastly, since using genetically modified (GM) components is prohibited under organic certification, the controversy surrounding GM crops has boosted the demand for organic food. Other significant considerations are the mainstream stores' and big food manufacturers' increasingly aggressive and focused marketing and promotion as they expand into organic product lines (Gunasekaran & Murugan, 2020).

Despite its historical importance in traditional diets and its purported health benefits, farmers and manufacturers frequently view the organic products industry as a niche market. It is essential to push for the larger-scale, government-backed spread of organic farming. Farmers might be encouraged to adopt organic practices through government facilitation through subsidized organic certification fees, guaranteeing a reasonable price for their produce. While modern customers are becoming more aware of the health and environmental benefits of switching to organic food, there is still limited accessibility. Significant obstacles include the limited availability of organic produce and the lack of stores specializing in organic goods (Hamzaoui-Essoussi & Zahaf, 2011).

Nepal and Karnali province governments have created several laws, regulations, standards, and initiatives to support organic agriculture, considering the advantages of organic farming in terms of the environment, society, economy, health, and commercial potential. Still, these activities are dispersed. These governmental policies, rules, standards, and programs are primarily intended to enable the export of Nepalese agricultural products while also promoting and regulating the development and processing of organic agriculture. They also seek to protect the environment and public health while increasing the revenue of farmers and agro-entrepreneurs. The comparative advantage of poor farmers who engage in traditional farming on less contaminated, marginal soils is capitalized upon by organic agriculture. These organic farmers may see increased revenue and better health because of being integrated into international value chains. Moreover, their engagement in organic farming can strengthen their resistance to climate change, mitigate its effects, and increase food security (ADB, 2015). The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To explore the market opportunities of organic products in Karnali province, Nepal.
2. To identify the market challenges of organic products in Karnali province, Nepal.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gunasekaran and Murugan (2020) have analyzed the organic product market as a niche market; organic products maintain ancestral eating practices that promote good health. Government action is required to incentivize large-scale organic farming by allowing farmers to obtain better prices through minimal-fee organic certification. Though the necessity to transition to organic foods is becoming more widely recognized among consumers, accessibility is still limited because of low production and few shops, which drives up costs and decreases acceptance. Environmental quality, resource conservation, and sustainable farming methods are prioritized in organic farming. Products that meet strict cultivation requirements and are devoid of toxic chemicals and genetically modified organisms are classified as organic. In traditional marketing frameworks, this study tries to analyze organic products and their value-added attributes.

Gurung et al. (2020) have conducted research in Nepal on the topic of organic farming, which is becoming more and more popular in Nepalese society. In addition to comparing the revenue from organic vs inorganic products, this study attempted to evaluate organic farming methods and job prospects and pinpoint farmers' difficulties. From April to May 2019, data for the study were gathered in Sundarbazar, in the Lamjung district of Nepal. According to the findings, 137 jobs were produced by organic farming, compared to 99 by inorganic farming. However, among farmers from diverse economic backgrounds (rich, middle, and poor), there was a significant difference in the amount of employment generated by organic farming. A significant revenue gap was found, with organic cucumbers costing US\$ 0.18 more than inorganic ones. The average yearly income of wealthy organic farmers was US\$ 8677.54, substantially more than the US\$ 2603.26 received by inorganic farmers.

Peng (2019) has observed that biodiversity preservation, ecological balance, and agricultural resource protection are all included in organic farming. This is true throughout the growing season. With consumer demand for organic food items rising significantly, there is an increasing awareness of food safety, animal welfare, and environmental sustainability. Due to related trade and job prospects, organic farming has become economically viable locally and worldwide, driven by a spike in the popularity of organic agriculture and its products driven by federal subsidies to match market demand. Despite the persistent economic challenges, the extraordinary demand for organic foods and the methodical development of the organic farming sector in Europe and North America has driven organic products into the mainstream of both domestic and international markets. Despite obstacles, including uneven supply and demand, food inflation, and inadequate certification, the organic goods market still shows strong growth potential.

Banerjee and Sharma (2018) have studied the growing population, expanding economy, and growing consciousness of environmental sustainability are pushing businesses and consumers to look for alternatives. Organic food items have become a significant asset in the fight against environmental degradation and in increasing job possibilities. The study examines the prospects and obstacles of promoting organic food items in Dehradun and its environs. In addition, it determines the discrepancy between supply and demand and evaluates the financial feasibility of implementing organic products. The study suggests that organic farming is a viable production system for sustainable development.

Jayakumar and Ezhilvani (2018) examined organic farming and consumption. People are seeking healthier lifestyles because of the widespread use of fertilizers and chemicals, which drives growth in the organic sector. As the advantages of eating organic food have become more widely known, so has its significance for preserving good health and leading a healthy lifestyle. Now, public awareness of organic food items is proliferating. This heightened consciousness results from a more profound comprehension of organic food's agricultural practices and health advantages. Proponents of organic farming exhibit optimism over the future, projecting a significant surge in sales within the next five years. They are keen to grow their operations and are happy with their business success. The creation of a framework is suggested in this research to convert the high level of consumer awareness of organic foods into more purchases. It seeks to take advantage of the quickly opening doors in the expanding organic food industry.

Padel (2017) has highlighted the prospects and difficulties of the organic products industry. Fundamental principles and theories of food marketing are introduced as a primer for consumers, following a brief introduction outlining the size and developments in the worldwide organic market. The concepts guiding organic food production, the locations of organic food stores, and the aspects of cost and advertising are all covered in the following sections. What customers look for in organic product purchases is covered in the following section. The chapter's conclusion reflects the inherent

difficulty of marketing organic food. While purchasing and selling organic food is a business transaction, the value-based practices and tenets of organic agriculture also aim to transform our food system. The market itself cannot accomplish the overarching goal of improving the health of soil, crops, livestock, people, and the environment.

Ummyiah et al. (2017) studied the worldwide market for organic products, which will expand significantly over the next several years, with growth rates in the medium term predicted to range from 10-15 percent to 25-30 percent. Farmers now can profit from trade with comparatively substantial price premiums thanks to the growth of the organic sector. Even with this potential, many farmers—especially those in developing nations—remain mostly ignorant of the prospects in this market. Hence, access to up-to-date information on market demands and trends is crucial for critical stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), farmer organizations, traders, and exporters that support organic farming. Despite some doubts, the organic farming movement appears to have transformed from a movement into an industry based on its attractive marketing strategy and encouraging growth projections. The principal domestic markets for organic products are found in India's major cities, such as Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai, Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Kolkata. Globally, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America are the export markets for organic products. Organic agriculture is one of the fastest-growing sectors in global agribusiness, characterized by double-digit annual growth around land under organic cultivation, the value of organic produce, and the number of organic farmers.

De Callatay and Defraigne (2016) analyzed the guidance to European businesses attempting to enter the Chinese organic market. Along with a thorough literature study on Chinese organic consumers, it provides a detailed market analysis. It offers insights into this market's attitudes, preferences, and purchasing behaviors. Furthermore, fieldwork in Beijing in June 2016 tackles four distinct study topics about Chinese consumers' mindsets, providing a comprehensive picture of the country's present customs and beliefs. This thesis adds to the corpus of knowledge already available in the field of international business concerning the Chinese organic market. It is beneficial for European companies looking to export organic food to China since it offers specific suggestions on how to deal with this market.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used an exploratory qualitative design to gain insight into the perspectives and experiences of market opportunities and challenges of organic products in Karnali Province, Nepal. Kurgun et al. (2011) point out that exploratory research design, which aims at identifying a problem and its aspects, is used more widely in qualitative research methods. This study employed in-depth interviews with farmers, business people, and experts involved in the organic sector in Karnali Province, Nepal. An in-depth interview is a conversational, lengthy, and interactive exchange of ideas, during which the researcher works to develop a close relationship with participants so that responses are deep and meaningful (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012). A convenience sampling technique was used to select 30 participants, including 10 farmers, 10 entrepreneurs, and 10 experts involved in the organic sector (Table 1). Qualitative research is to gain an in-depth understanding of a specific phenomenon. In-depth interviews, lasting 60 minutes on average, covered topics such as market opportunities and challenges of organic products. Demographic data were collected using structured questions, while semi-structured questions were used to gather information on the significant factors of interest during April 2024. The collected data from the interviews were analyzed through content analysis, a qualitative research method that involves identifying and categorizing themes and patterns in text data. This study can collect data through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observation of market opportunities and challenges of organic products. The data collected can be analyzed using thematic analysis, which

involves identifying patterns and themes. This can help identify key themes related to market opportunities and challenges related to organic products in Karnali province, Nepal. The process includes several processes, including transcription, coding, analysis, and interpretation. Based on the research findings, the study can provide information related to market opportunities and challenges of organic products.

Table 1

Respondents Profile

Respondents	Number
Farmers of organic products	10
Entrepreneur of organic products	10
Experts in organic sectors	10
Total	30

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Market Opportunities

There are numerous strong market prospects for organic products in Nepal's Karnali Province. Organic agriculture and its market are supported by the region's unique geographic and cultural setting and the rising local and international demand for organic produce. Listed below are some significant market prospects:

Growing demand for organic products

According to Peng (2019), the growing demand for organic products worldwide is fueled by consumers prioritizing their health. Therefore, there is a high prospect of Karnali's organic products being exported. Nepal has a growing consumer awareness of and preference for organic products, particularly among urban populations prepared to pay a premium for healthier, pesticide-free food. An organic product farmer, J. Bhandari, 10 April 2024, mentioned, "Due to increased awareness of the negative consequences of chemicals and pesticides used in conventional farming, consumers are choosing organic produce in favor of a healthier lifestyle. Growing consumer awareness has increased the demand for fruits, vegetables, and cereals farmed without artificial pesticides and fertilizers".

Similarly, an organic product entrepreneur, A. Bista, 15 April 2024, focused on "Growing numbers of consumers are aware of organic products' advantages for their health. They think eating fruits and vegetables free of chemicals improves their general health. Thus, they favor them".

Likewise, an expert in the organic sector, S. Thapa, on 12 April 2024, highlighted that "The demand for organic products has significantly increased in Karnali Province in recent years. Numerous factors, such as consumers' increased awareness of their health, growing environmental concerns, and the trend toward sustainable living, can contribute to this surge. Organic farming practices have gained popularity among traditional agricultural groups in distant places, resulting in a greater availability of organic goods, including fruits, vegetables, and grains".

Integrated Agro-tourism

Tourism is drawn to Karnali by its cultural legacy and scenic beauty. Including organic farming in agro-tourism can improve visitor experiences and give organic products direct access to markets. It can draw

tourists and promote organic products by providing farm-to-table eating experiences, farm stays, and organic farm trips (Kaini, 2020). In this regard, one farmer, G. Magar, 14 April 2024, said, “The beauty of our organic farms is combined with immersive experiences for guests in our agro-tourism enterprise in the Karnali Province. Visitors may witness sustainable agricultural methods up close through guided excursions through verdant fields and interactive harvesting activities. We arrange farm-to-table dinners, for instance, where guests can savor freshly selected veggies and discover our farming practices.”

An entrepreneur of organic products, J. Roka, 15 April 2024, focused on “Our province, Karnali, is at the forefront of a new market niche created by combining organic product offerings with agro-tourism. We curate tours that highlight the process from farm to fork, and we do it through smart collaborations with nearby farms and hospitality establishments. We have created special packages, for instance, combining farm stays with cooking lessons using organic ingredients from our partner farms”.

Furthermore, H. Sharma, an expert in the organic product sector, mentioned on 20 April 2024 that “In Karnali Province, the blending of organic goods with agro-tourism is an example of a comprehensive strategy for sustainable rural development. Through the utilization of the area's abundant natural resources and agricultural legacy, local communities are enabled to expand their sources of income while also conserving the environment. The creation of community-led agro-tourism cooperatives serves as an example, where guests engage in organic farming while also taking in beautiful scenery, creating a stronger sense of connection between the land and its people”.

Government and NGO support

Baral et al. (2020) have pointed out that the policies of the Nepalese government, which encourage organic farming and offer financial assistance and technical guidance, might be utilized to facilitate the growth of organic agriculture. Several NGOs are active in Karnali to promote sustainable agriculture. By working together, organic farmers can gain access to markets, resources, and training from these organizations. From the view of a farmer, N. Thapa, 22 April 2024, said, “Our conventional farming methods have been transformed into sustainable organic ways thanks in large part to the backing of NGOs and the government. Training, subsidies, and market connections have all helped us raise our yields and income significantly. For example, increased production has resulted from government provision of organic farming equipment”.

In the case of government and NGO support, an organic product entrepreneur, S. Bhandari, 23 April 2024, mentioned, “The Karnali Province now has a favorable climate for organic entrepreneurship thanks to the collaborative efforts of government agencies and non-governmental organizations. We have been able to innovate and broaden our product line thanks to grants for establishing processing units and technical support. As a result, we can now reach urban regions with our organic juice business”.

Likewise, B. Khadka, an expert on 24 April 2024, highlighted that “The development of the organic industry in Karnali Province has been accelerated by the government and NGOs working together synergistically. They have created an environment where farmers and business owners can prosper using programs like capacity-building seminars and certification subsidies. One noteworthy instance is the creation of organic certification centers, which have expedited the certification procedure and allowed small-scale farmers to reach high-end markets in the United States and abroad”.

Potential for Exporters

According to Acharya et al. (2020), there is a considerable market for organic goods internationally. Global demand exists for Nepali organic products like tea, coffee, herbs, and spices. Producers in Karnali can export their goods to markets in Europe, North America, and Asia if they meet international organic criteria. A farmer, G. Acharaya, 11 April 2024, mentioned, "I have seen how demand for organic produce is rising worldwide. We can sell premium goods like organic quinoa and wild honey to international markets thanks to our lush lands and dedication to organic agricultural practices. This would ensure local farmers had a stable income while satisfying the growing demand for organic foods globally".

Furthermore, an entrepreneur, K. Adhikari, 28 April 2024, said, "Exporters of organic products have much potential in the Karnali Province. In addition to accessing global markets, we can generate employment opportunities and support regional economic growth by setting up value-added processing facilities for goods like organic herbs and spices. We can establish Karnali as a premium supplier of organic products and draw in discriminating customers from around the world with careful branding and market placement".

One of the experts, D. Rawal, on 21 April 2024, focused on "Karnali Province is known for its distinct biodiversity and immaculate surroundings that are ideal for organic farming. Infrastructure investments, including cold storage facilities, transportation networks, and certification procedures, are essential to maximizing its export potential. Additionally, establishing alliances with foreign distributors and participating in trade shows will help open markets for Karnali's organic products, guaranteeing the province's agricultural sector's sustained growth and fostering environmental preservation".

Local Community Empowerment

In the case of local community empowerment, Dahal et al. (2016), organic farming may help women and marginalized groups become employed and generate income, which will help to advance social inclusion and economic growth. Establishing farmer organizations and cooperatives can aid in group marketing, cost-cutting, and strengthening negotiating positions. One of the farmers, B. Hamal, on 18 April 2024, focused on the following: "Beyond simple gardening, our goal is to cultivate self-reliance. We empower our community to recover traditional knowledge and create a sustainable future by adopting organic farming practices and protecting our land.

Likewise, an entrepreneur, M. Thapa, 17 April 2024, highlighted that "Every packet of heritage seeds or jar of organic honey produced in Karnali is more than simply a product; it is a symbol of the tenacity and resourcefulness of our people. By purchasing these products, we are fostering a culture of empowerment and pride and helping local economies".

An expert, P. Shrestha, 19 April 2024, said, "In Karnali, the growing popularity of organic goods is more than simply a fad; it is a sign of community empowerment. Farmers are rebuilding livelihoods, enhancing communities, and paving the way for economic independence through cooperative efforts and knowledge-sharing programs".

Market Challenges

Organic agriculture has much promise in Nepal's Karnali Province, which is renowned for its abundant natural resources and varied ecosystems. Nevertheless, several obstacles face this region's organic product market. These challenges are described below.

Limited Infrastructure

Getting organic products from remote places to markets is challenging due to poor road connectivity and transportation infrastructure. Post-harvest losses caused by inadequate storage facilities impact the availability and quality of organic goods (Chaulagai, 2011). A farmer, K. Basnet, on 29 April 2024, said, “For us organic farmers in Karnali Province, the inadequate infrastructure presents serious difficulties. We fight to deliver our products to the market on time without adequate transportation and storage networks, frequently leading to product spoiling and revenue loss. For example, our fresh food is nearly impossible to deliver to urban centers during the rainy season when roads become impassable”.

Similarly, one of the entrepreneurs, G. Acharaya, 8 April 2024, focused on “The local limited infrastructure in Karnali Province presents both obstacles and opportunities for entrepreneurs in the organic products sector. While the lack of cold storage and efficient transportation systems hampers distribution, it also encourages innovation. For example, some entrepreneurs have begun implementing decentralized, community-based storage solutions using renewable energy sources to preserve organic produce, fostering resilience in the face of infrastructure challenges”.

D. Gurung, an expert, on 11 April 2024, highlighted that “The Karnali Province's organic products industry has significant challenges due to inadequate infrastructure, hence impeding the region's ability to achieve sustainable economic growth. Farmers and business owners find it difficult to expand their operations and reach new markets without sufficient processing, packaging, and distribution infrastructure. In infrastructure development, specific investments must be made to support the region's burgeoning organic agriculture industry, such as building cold storage facilities and enhancing transportation networks”.

Certification Barriers

According to Acharya, Ghimire, and Wagle (2020), getting organic certification can be costly and complex, particularly for small-scale farmers who need more money or expertise to handle the procedure. Farmers might not have access to certifying agencies or be completely informed of the certification procedure. One of the farmers, R. Rokaya, on 14 April 2024, focused on “The certification process is unknown to many farmers in Karnali. Acquiring the required certificates, even if they are, is challenging due to a lack of information and resources. I find it difficult to negotiate the bureaucratic requirements as a farmer since I have limited access to information and advice”.

Likewise, an entrepreneur, S. Sunar, 29 April 2024, said, “For entrepreneurs such as me, the certification procedure is excessively costly and intricate. Getting certified as organic is expensive, and the processes are frequently complicated and time-consuming. This makes it extremely difficult to introduce certified organic products onto the market”.

Regarding certification barriers, an expert, T. Sherpa, 12 April 2024, highlighted, “The main problem in Karnali is the absence of institutional infrastructure and support for organic certification. The procedure entails negotiating through national or international institutions that are ill-suited to the local context, and there are not enough local certifying authorities. This lack of regional assistance hampers the inability of farmers and business owners to obtain certification”.

Market Access and Competition

Due to the remote location and lack of market connections, farmers in Karnali may need help to reach larger markets. Organic products are frequently up against fierce competition from less expensive,

conventionally farmed substitutes (Rokaya & Pandey, 2023). Furthermore, a farmer, C. Kami, 13 April 2024, described, "Although we produce excellent organic vegetables, it is difficult for us to reach larger markets because of inadequate transportation and consumer ignorance of the advantages of our goods. Because local markets are limited and many people are uninformed of the value of organic food, our organic produce frequently goes unsold or is sold for a poor price".

Similarly, on 17 April 2024, R. Joshi, an entrepreneur, focused on "It is challenging to grow our organic product business due to intense competition from the market's preponderance of less expensive non-organic products. We need stronger branding and marketing tactics to differentiate our organic products from the competition. However, competing with large-scale conventional producers is difficult due to high costs and logistical challenges."

An expert, G. Karki, 26 April 2024, has described, "To expand market access for their organic products, farmers in Karnali Province require increased government support in subsidies and infrastructure. In addition to greatly improving market access, direct connections between urban customers and organic farmers can also lessen the strain of non-organic product rivalry".

Technical Skills and Knowledge

Atreya et al. (2020) have pointed out that insufficient training and knowledge about organic farming methods may cause farmers to produce inconsistently high-quality work at lower yields. Effective pest and disease control methods are necessary for organic farming, but doing so without chemicals can be difficult. A farmer, P. Malla, 23 April 2024, said, "I now realize how crucial it is to become proficient in natural pest control methods and composting procedures. For example, we employ locally accessible resources to make organic fertilizers, which, when combined with no chemicals, greatly increase agricultural yields and soil health".

Furthermore, one of the entrepreneurs, R. Basnet, 19 April 2024, highlighted, "It is essential to comprehend consumer preferences and industry trends regarding organic products. For instance, I created a marketing plan that emphasizes our organic goods' sustainability and health advantages, and it has drawn in a devoted clientele".

An expert, N. Koirala, 24 April 2024, focused on "It is necessary to teach farmers about advanced organic certification procedures and sustainable farming methods. I conduct workshops on the advantages of intercropping and crop rotation, which assist farmers in boosting productivity and preserving soil fertility naturally".

Awareness and Perception

There may be less demand for organic products in the area if local consumers are not entirely aware of the advantages of these products. If organic products are not correctly certified and marketed, there may be doubts regarding their validity and quality (Chandrashekar, 2014). In the case of awareness and perception, T. Nepali, a farmer, 7 April 2024, said, "It seems that consciousness is progressively growing. In my community, there is a growing interest in organic agricultural practices, with some individuals even purchasing organic vegetables despite their higher prices. For instance, I frequently field questions about the advantages of organic products and my farming methods at the local markets".

Likewise, an entrepreneur, M. Giri, 5 April 2024, described, "Raising awareness is a major opportunity as well as a challenge. Though many consumers do not first see the difference between conventional

and organic products, word-of-mouth and educational initiatives have begun to change people's attitudes. Demand for organic vegetables has increased noticeably since I organized several community seminars”.

An expert, L. Shahi, on 15 April 2024, highlighted, “Perception and awareness seem to be inconsistent. Organic products are becoming increasingly popular in the province in metropolitan regions, while rural communities are lagging because of communication gaps. For instance, in my fieldwork, I discovered that many farmers are eager to use sustainable practices once they know the advantages but are unfamiliar with the organic certification procedure.

5. CONCLUSION

The market for organic products in Karnali Province, Nepal, presents a mix of promising opportunities and significant challenges. The region’s unique geographical and cultural context, coupled with increasing local and global demand for organic products, sets a fertile ground for growth in organic agriculture. Rising health consciousness, environmental awareness, and consumer preference for pesticide-free food have created substantial market prospects. Moreover, integrated agrotourism, government and NGO support, export potential, and local community empowerment further bolster the potential for organic farming in Karnali.

However, there are also significant obstacles that temper these opportunities. Efficient distribution of organic products is impeded by inadequate infrastructure, encompassing insufficient transportation and storage facilities. Significant obstacles include farmers' lack of technical expertise, market access problems, fierce competition from traditional crops, and certification impediments. To maintain and expand the market, local consumers' awareness of and perception of the advantages of organic products also need to be raised.

To tackle these obstacles, stakeholders from the public and commercial sectors must work together to invest in infrastructure, offer technical training, streamline certification procedures, and improve market accessibility. By doing this, Karnali Province can better utilize its organic farming potential while promoting sustainable economic growth, environmental preservation, and enhanced community livelihoods.

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